

Fire Support:

Killing System or Battlefield Shaper?

by Robert Doughty



If artillery is given credit for a large amount of battle damage, but doesn't set the conditions for successful maneuver, was this fire support successful?

Often, as I've watched a maneuver after-action review or fire support AAR, the Fire Support Officer (FSO) was credited with a "job well done" if the artillery killed many enemy combat systems, and criticism if it didn't. There didn't seem to be much consideration given to whether the fire supporter met the commander's intent or supported the commander's scheme of maneuver. As long as there are many enemy vehicles destroyed, fire support did well, according to this judgment.

But in reality, even if the indirect fires did not cause a large amount of battle damage, but set the conditions for maneuver to be successful, then the fire support was used correctly and should be remembered in the back-slapping that follows a successful mission.

Even "success" can be a murky concept: If the commander wanted his fire support (FS) to destroy a motorized rifle battalion (MRB), and the indirect does indeed accomplish this task, but with the majority of kills coming from the third MRB when the battle is all but over, did the fire support do its job? My contention is that if the OPFOR was able to get through a maneuver commander's defenses and decimate his unit with his first echelon because the artillery was not focused at the right place at the right time, then regardless if the number of enemy vehicles killed, we do not have success.

If the maneuver commander is unable to get enough combat power on the objective to finish his mission because the artillery is counter-firing, rather than suppressing and obscuring the objective, the fire support did not do its job. I have often seen TF commanders, even after los-

ing, lean over and give his FSO a pat on the back merely based on the battle damage assessment (BDA).

When I was going through advanced individual training (AIT) back in April 1976, I was told that the best anti-tank weapon was another tank. I know there are other systems that will also do well against armor. The point was that artillery may destroy some combat vehicles but its primary mission was to assist in the battle, not win it.

The task force commander does have a tool for giving the FSO better guidance, called Essential Fire Support Tasks (EFSTs), but if not used correctly, they still will not make for a successful mission. In most EFSTs, I see the same statements, depending on the type of battle being fought. "Destroy the Regimental Artillery Group (RAG)," or "Destroy one MRB or motorized rifle platoon (MRP)," or "Fire artillery FASCAM (family of scatterable mines) to separate the Forward Detachment and the Main Body," or "At 0600, Fire SOSR."

These EFSTs will not assist the maneuver commander in attaining success unless they are linked with what the maneuver forces or the engineers are doing at the time. Firing counter-fire while the maneuver forces or engineers are doing a breach, or when the enemy has moved up to breach our obstacles, may not be in the best interest of success. I'm not saying to ignore the counter-fire fight at this time, but if the maneuver commander has told the FSO he wants a critical friendly zone (CFZ) over the point of penetration, that does not mean a CFZ that is 1 kilometer by 1 kilometer. The artillery can quickly become so overwhelmed with Priority One acquisitions that they cannot effectively engage any. Or they try to engage all acquisitions with a lower volley count,

having little or no effect on OPFOR artillery.

If the CFZ had been made small enough to cover just the breach site, just those incoming artillery missions that affect that very critical event in the battle will be answered. This would have freed up assets that would have better been used to shoot smoke and suppression missions. This type of scenario may not destroy a MRP but it will get enough combat power on the objective so that the maneuver force can take it down. If the fire support element (FSE) had planned numerous radar zones, they may destroy the RAG, but at what cost? If, after destroying the RAG, they concentrate on the objective, they may even destroy a MRP or more, but did the maneuver commander lose too much combat power going through the breach because we focused on the enemy artillery, whether or not it was firing on our forces at the breach site? The EFSTs might have been met; we may have checked the block and credited artillery in the BDA for that night's AAR, but did we shape the battlefield for the maneuver element's success?

Another problem concerns the firing of the artillery-delivered family of scatterable mines (FASCAM). As Col. Anderson noted in his September 1998 *Field Artillery Journal* article, units at Combat Training Centers (CTCs) rely heavily on FASCAM, but these minefields are seldom adequately covered with direct or indirect fire systems. He further states that, "Commanders and FSOs tend not to understand the tradeoffs they incur firing this resource-intensive munition."

An EFST that has the artillery firing a FASCAM to separate the FD (forward detachment) and MB (main body) is an example of that. Artillery-delivered FASCAM is not a blocking obstacle or a turn-

ing obstacle by itself. If we fire the FASCAM too deep to be covered by direct fire systems, or there are no eyes on it that can call indirect fires, then the best it can do is delay. An enemy with a good breach drill will be through it in 10 minutes. If the maneuver commander had wanted to destroy the FD with direct fire systems and only needed an extra 10 minutes to do it, perhaps FASCAM would be useful, but in most cases, this would not be true. The maneuver commander might not have realized how long it takes to emplace the FASCAM, during which he will not be able to mass indirect fires. If the artillery-delivered FASCAM had been used to reseed an obstacle that was already being overwatched and covered by direct fire, it may be more useful, but if the maneuver commander is not willing to give up his ability to mass indirect fires, then perhaps it shouldn't be fired at all.

Just because brigade or division has given the brigade or task force commander release to use FASCAM doesn't mean that it has to be used. There may be a few vehicles destroyed in the FASCAM and maybe even one or two vehicles killed going in or coming out of the minefield, but this is another case where the fire supporter could accomplish an EFST and not shape the battlefield or set conditions for success.

When the maneuver commander is sitting in an AAR discovering how well he did, before offering his congratulations or criticism to his FSO, he should look at the whole battle. Just because the artillery is given credit for a large amount of BDA, and if it didn't set the conditions for a maneuver success, then his fire support was not successful. On the flip side, even if the indirect fire is not credited with a large amount of BDA, but the conditions were set for maneuver to be

successful in their battle, then the fire support was used correctly and should be remembered in the back-slapping that follows a successful mission.

There will be those fire supporters who will complain that because CTCs cannot replicate the terror and proper suppressive effects that indirect fires cause, they are hampered in shaping the battlefield; however, if we can learn to do the job with the tools we have, we will be even more effective when fighting a real enemy shooting real bullets.

Robert Doughty is currently a Fire Support Maneuver Analyst at CMTC, Hohenfels, Germany. Previously, he was a Brigade Maneuver Analyst and NCOIC, Fire Support TAF at the CMTC, Hohenfels. Additionally, he has served as Battalion Fire Direction Chief, 2/78 FA, Bamberg.